

Serenity to Accept What I Cannot Change

Luke 9:21-22, 22:39-53

²¹He sternly ordered and commanded them not to tell anyone, ²²saying, “The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.”

³⁹He came out and went, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives; and the disciples followed him. ⁴⁰When he reached the place, he said to them, “Pray that you may not come into the time of trial.” ⁴¹Then he withdrew from them about a stone’s throw, knelt down, and prayed, ⁴²“Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done.” [⁴³Then an angel from heaven appeared to him and gave him strength. ⁴⁴In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground.] ⁴⁵When he got up from prayer, he came to the disciples and found them sleeping because of grief, ⁴⁶and he said to them, “Why are you sleeping? Get up and pray that you may not come into the time of trial.”

⁴⁷While he was still speaking, suddenly a crowd came, and the one called Judas, one of the twelve, was leading them. He approached Jesus to kiss him; ⁴⁸but Jesus said to him, “Judas, is it with a kiss that you are betraying the Son of Man?” ⁴⁹When those who were around him saw what was coming, they asked, “Lord, should we strike with the sword?” ⁵⁰Then one of them struck the slave of the high priest and cut off his right ear. ⁵¹But Jesus said, “No more of this!” And he touched his ear and healed him. ⁵²Then Jesus said to the chief priests, the officers of the temple police, and the elders who had come for him, “Have you come out with swords and clubs as if I were a bandit? ⁵³When I was with you day after day in the temple, you did not lay hands on me. But this is your hour, and the power of darkness!”



I Must Walk Again the Wooded Path¹

I must walk again the wooded path;
I must stroll the country lane
Where sunsets fall like summer plums
And stardust falls like rain

I must chase again the firefly
On the honeysuckle vine.
And watch an eagle spread its wings
Above the tallest pine.

I must see once more a hummingbird
Where hollyhocks grow wild.
And run barefoot through Autumn leaves
Like I did as a child.

¹ Clay Harrison in Serenity Prayers, p. 8

I must stand atop a mountain
 When the valley's white with snow.
And linger there till purple haze
 Spreads twilight far below.

I must do these things lest I forget
 How precious life can be.
I must walk again the wooded path
 Of quaint simplicity.

Whether it is the wooded path, the sound of a fountain, or the gentle strings of a harp, we are reminded that there is such a thing as “serenity”.

Sitting in the porch swing with my grandmother, rocking rhythmically and listening to her soft voice it was easy to fall asleep on a summer afternoon. I didn't know the word at the time, but that moment was serene.

Oh that it could ever be so, but life can be hard, so hard that we think that must live in turmoil from difficulties at work, an unsolvable physical problem, an ailing marriage, family members with serious problems, a bedeviled psyche.

Lisa found life that way. Her son, Matthew, has autism. In spite of endless efforts, she has made few inroads. When his 2nd grade class goes on a field trip, it is not long before Matthew says “Go home” meaning “I want to go home”. And if she does not respond he shouts “Go home!” In moments like that Lisa has prayed “God, grant me the serenity to accept what I cannot change.”

One day, Matthew had used up his energy for being with his class. So as they were going on a scavenger hunt, Matthew and his mom were walking to their van. Along the way a blue jay crossed their path, squawking as he flew. Matthew heard the squawking and laughed from the bottom of his toes. When the jay flew squawking to another tree, Matthew laughed again, a full body laugh.

In their van, when Lisa looked in the rear view mirror, Matthew was listening to music on his headphones and he was smiling. She accepted that Matthew's would enjoy other such field trips with his class. Her prayer for serenity, for acceptance of what cannot be changed, had been answered.²



Lisa's experience is not unique. We see in Scripture frequent witnesses to serenity.

In the 23rd psalm the writer's soul has been restored at green pastures by still waters...while in the valley of the shadow of death.

² See “The Other Field Trip” in James Stuart Bell and Jeanette Gardner Littleton, Living the Serenity Prayer, Adams Media, Avon, Massachusetts, 2008, p. 4ff

In the book of Acts we read of the apostle Stephen being at peace when he was being stoned. He prayed for the forgiveness of those who were killing him.

And then there was Jesus. Early in his ministry Jesus understood that he would undergo great suffering. When the moment came, however, he struggled at a deeper level whether it must be so. He didn't know. And so he prayed that night in Gethsemane he wrestled with God in prayer. "Must it be so???" Sometime that night, he realized what he was called to do. So when the soldiers arrived, he did not fight, did not flee; he accepted what was to be.

What is this serenity that we see in Jesus? And how may we find it?

Perhaps it is easiest to begin with what serenity is not.

Katherine Swarts writes

Serenity is not³
A quiet mountain lake,
Nor a nature preserve
With only the birds for company
Nor release from responsibility:
For the soul determined to fret and worry
Is little swayed by circumstance.

We may think that we will be at peace when the house is cleaned, or when the bills all paid, or when an desired object is purchased. But circumstances change and "anything gained by our effort can be lost in an instant." Remember that scene in "The Christmas Story" where the turkey is filling the house with its aroma. The father, played by Darren McGavin, and he is savoring the aroma. As he sat reading his paper and the turkey sat cooling on the counter, suddenly, the neighbor's dogs rush in and maul the turkey, leaving only assaulted turkey parts on the floor. Anything gained through our effort can be lost in a moment. It is a momentary or false serenity.

Likewise, we may mistakenly think that serenity may be had by changing things that cannot be change. Instead of gaining peace, trying to change what cannot be changed leads to feelings of frustration, powerlessness, helplessness, hopelessness or despair.

Spiritual peace, true serenity, is a deep inner sense that all is well, even in the midst of difficult surroundings.

Jim had used drugs and alcohol heavily for years. He described himself as "stoned all day, every day." By taking part in a 12-step program, Jim had been free of all drugs for months and was now sober.

³ Katherine Swarts in June Cotner, Serenity Prayers, Andrew McMeel Publishing, Kansas City, Missouri, 2009, p.

Outwardly, his life was still very difficult, but he had a shift in his viewpoint about life. He had discovered an inner strength he had not known and no longer felt the intense anxiety that had been so much a part of his life. One day he realized “I’ve got fingernails!” He had not tried to stop biting his nails; he had stopped because he had found that inner peace, serenity.

For countless people, serenity has come through this simple prayer: God grant me the serenity to accept what I cannot change.

An American theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr included the prayer in one of his sermons. For awhile it was thought that he may have adopted it from an earlier author. Current thinking is that he likely was the author.

Anyhow, the Serenity Prayer was quoted in 1941 in the newspaper and William Griffith Wilson, co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous printed it in modified form and distributed it. Ever sense it has been a basic and powerful tool for those in recovery. It may be a powerful tool for all people.

Let’s focus on several truths about the Serenity Prayer.

Truth One This prayer was not the clever idea of someone at Hallmark. It was written and prayed by a man who had given his life to thinking deeply about God and the life to which God calls us.

Truth Two The Serenity Prayer is a prayer.

“God” it begins.

For some, that only makes sense, but for others, God is neither presumed nor trusted. One woman wrote that before she discovered and embraced the Serenity Prayer, “God had only been one half of a swear word.”⁴

True serenity comes from God...in answer to prayer.

So, for some, the first step towards true serenity comes by rethinking “God”.

One man wrestled with the idea of God. Previously he had thought that “religious people were not very thoughtful and thoughtful people were not very religious.”⁵ But as in this prayer of Dr. Niebuhr, he realized that some very thoughtful people were religious.

Rabbi Shapiro is one of those thoughtful religious people He has written (Welcoming Angels⁶)

In the arduous simplicity of this moment
I open my heart, mind, and soul to stillness.
In the deeper quiet

⁴ Barb Rogers, Twenty-five Words: How the Serenity Prayer Can Save Your Life, Conari Press, San Francisco, CA, 2005, p. 8

⁵ William V. Pietsch, The Serenity Prayer Book, HarperOne, New York, NY, 1992, p. 4

⁶ Rabbi Rami M. Shapiro in June Cotner Serenity Prayers, p. 4

I sense the greater Life that is my life.
I do not live only; I am lived.
I do not breathe only; I am breathed.
I am not only the one I appear to be
But also the One who appears in me.

Truth Three We realize that the serenity of this prayer is tied to acceptance of things that cannot be changed.

[In the next two weeks we will explore the courage to change what we can and the wisdom to know the difference. One of the beauties of his prayer is that it acknowledges that all people need both acceptance and change – perhaps in different measures at different times.⁷]

How do we accept what cannot be changed?

Human longing is powerfully strong. What we learn from Jesus that serenity does not come without struggle. Jesus wrestled with God in prayer and sweat drops like blood.

Richard Foster the Quaker writer speaks of the necessity of the struggle.

Gaze in adoring wonder at the scene. The solitary figure etched against gnarled olive trees. The bloodlike sweat falling to the ground. The human longing: “let this cup pass.” The final relinquishment: “not my will but yours be done.”

He really did want the cup to pass, and he asked that it would pass. “If you are willing” was his questioning, his wondering. The Father’s will was not yet absolutely clear to him. “Is there any other way?” “Can people be redeemed by some different means?”

Truth Four The struggle with God is necessary because this prayer is not about fatalism – giving up or giving in to “whatever will be will be”. It is seeking God’s good will.

Accepting what cannot be changed is not simply detachment – distancing ourselves from our dreams and desires. Rather, what we see in Jesus is a letting-go-with-hope! It is a trust that God is good and out to do good to us always.

After a life of facing much that he could not change the Apostle Paul affirmed his profound trust that “God works for the good in everything with those who love him and are called according to his purpose.”

Part of the serenity that comes through this prayer is the trust that God is up to something good. That accepting what cannot be changed is “trusting that there is a bigger plan that we can’t see” and “making room for something more”.⁸

⁷ See Flanagan, p. 9

⁸ See Eileen Flannigan, The Wisdom to Know the Difference, the Penguin Group, New York, NY, 2009, p.198

Eileen Flannigan's friend was devastated that she could not conceive a child. In her struggle, she accepted what she could not change and made room for something more – two children by adoption..

There are injustices, tragedies, griefs too many to mention, but the serenity that comes from God rests in the trust that the whole world is in God's hands and one day, God's good will will be done on earth as it is in heaven.



The Serenity Prayer is twenty-five simple words but they make a profound prayer that has led many to inner peace. One Christian man says that after the Lord's Prayer, the Serenity Prayer has become his most faithful guide in his spiritual life.⁹

I invite you to pray the Serenity prayer each day for the next 21 days. This week pray and pause to reflect on accepting the things you cannot change.

Katherine Swartz voices our hope

Serenity can be
Found in a blighted inner city
Where every night is shattered by gunfire,
Or in solitary confinement in a dirty cell,
Or amid the onslaught of a dozen demands,
For the soul that rests in God's peace
Is little swayed by circumstance.

⁹ Philip St. Romain, Reflecting on the Serenity Prayer, Liguori Press, Liguori, MO, 1997, p. viii